Riots Shatter Veneer of Coexistence in Israel's Mixed Towns

Israel's Jewish and Palestinian communities looked past each other until violence and bloodshed forced a reckoning.

By Roger Cohen

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ACRE, Israel — Uri Jeremias, a celebrated Israeli chef, saw himself as a benefactor. By bringing jobs, tourists and investment to the mainly Arab heart of the coastal town of Acre, he believed he was seen as nurturing coexistence between Jews and Arabs.

Until an Arab mob torched his Uri Buri restaurant in May and a Jewish guest at his luxury hotel was asphyxiated in the worst inter-community riots in decades.

"I was targeted as a Jew by radicalized thugs," Mr. Jeremias, 76, said at his airy house in Nahariya, a few miles north of Acre. "But many more Arabs came to help me put out the fires than came to burn my places down. We cannot allow a violent minority to win."

Mr. Jeremias' flowing Father Time beard and piercing blue eyes have become a feature of high-end travel magazines, where he has been portrayed as "cooking up coexistence" beside the glowing Ottoman walls of Acre's Old City. He vows to restore the restaurant soon. He wants to get his 62 employees, half of them Arab, back to work, for the sake of "all the people of Acre and also the state of Israel."

It won't be easy. Blending diverse people is tougher than blending flavors.

“Many more Arabs came to help me put out the fires than came to burn my places down. We cannot allow a violent minority to win,” said Uri Jeremias, a celebrated Israeli chef. Dan Balilty for The New York Times

The May riots, set off by provocative police interventions at the Aqsa Mosque and the outbreak of the 11-day Israel-Hamas war, tore away a thin layer of civility to expose seething resentments between Israel’s Jewish and Palestinian citizens. Across almost all of Israel’s seven officially “mixed” Arab-Jewish towns, gunfire, arson, stone-throwing and lynching left a trail of destruction. Arab mobs burned Jewish stores to the ground. Rightist Jewish vigilantes chanted “Death to Arabs.” Four people, two Jews and two Arabs, were killed and hundreds, mostly Arabs, were later arrested.

In Acre, a city whose Crusader, Ottoman, Arab and Jewish history has been one of uneasy mingling, a spark was enough to demonstrate that many Palestinians, who account for 30 percent of the town’s population of 56,000, saw Mr. Jeremias’s enterprise more as creeping exclusion and oppression than opportunity.

A journey across several mixed Israeli towns and cities revealed the extent of this mutual incomprehension. Seventy-three years after Israel’s birth in the 1948 Independence War, in which hundreds of thousands of Arabs fled or were driven out at gunpoint, Jews and Arabs in Israel live side by side but largely blind to each others’ lives. Towns portrayed as models of peaceful coexistence fester with resentments born of double standards.

While some 2.7 million Palestinians chafe under military occupation in the West Bank, the nearly 2 million Palestinians in Israel are increasingly demanding equal rights as Israeli citizens. The tensions in the mixed cities, and the sense of inequality underlying them, pose the question of whether Israel can ever be a Jewish and democratic state if democracy involves full equality under the law for the 21 percent of the population that is Palestinian.

Arab families in Acre’s Old City. As Israel moved toward more strident Jewish nationalism under Benjamin Netanyahu, Palestinians were buffeted in several directions. Dan Balilty for The New York Times

The unrest in May, which Reuven Rivlin, then Israel's president, likened to "a civil war between us," surprised many Israeli Jews. Israel was emerging from a shared and largely successful fight against the coronavirus pandemic, often involving Arab physicians and pharmacists, that bolstered feel-good illusions of a Jewish-Arab coming-together.

"It came as a shock to me," Tzachi Hanegbi, who was Israel's minister of community affairs during the turmoil, said.

For Palestinians, who have been living with a sense of growing alienation, the riots felt like an inevitable explosion.

Aida Touma-Sliman, an Arab member of Parliament from Acre, put it this way: "The dormant volcano erupted."

They had seen their status and their language downgraded by the nation-state law of 2018 that said the right to self-determination was "unique to the Jewish people." The bill stated in plain language what discrimination in land regulations, education and other areas of life had felt like for decades.

"We are second-class," said Ashraf Amer, a Palestinian social worker and activist in Acre. "When the Jews can see us at all."

As Israel moved under former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu toward more strident Jewish nationalism, Palestinians were buffeted in several directions.

Always a hybrid community — Israeli by citizenship, Palestinian by heritage, Muslim or Christian or Druze in religion, bilingual in Arabic and Hebrew, viewed with suspicion by some diaspora Palestinians, scarred by the trauma of their compatriots' expulsion — they developed a sharper sense of Palestinian identity even as their demands for full rights as Israeli citizens grew.

"The dormant volcano erupted," said Aida Touma-Sliman, an Arab member of Parliament from Acre. For Palestinians, who have been living with a sense of growing alienation, the riots felt like an inevitable explosion. Dan Balilty for The New York Times

Palestinian flags, rarely seen in Israel, appeared several times during the clashes. A May 18 general strike involved Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel, the first such joint labor protest in Israel and the occupied territories in decades. The people most Israelis have long referred to as "Israeli Arabs" — or colloquially by the demeaning "Arab sector" — now often self-identify

as Palestinians, a term many Israeli Jews resent, viewing it as a rejection of Israel.

For Arabs who stayed on after the Independence War — what Palestinians call the "Nakba," or catastrophe of 1948 — a timorous quest for assimilation in a new Jewish state has morphed into a direct challenge to that state to change.

"Israel calls itself a Jewish and democratic state," said Ahmad Tibi, an Arab lawmaker in the Knesset, or Parliament. "In reality, it is a democratic state for Jews and a Jewish state for Arabs. There is a double standard."

A Jewish-Owned Restaurant Burns in Acre

The Old City of Acre, behind its golden walls, is a beautiful decaying labyrinth of white buildings with wrought-iron balconies and blue shutters. Narrow alleys snake under arches. The green-tipped minaret of a 200-year-old mosque pierces the sky. Doves perch on air-conditioning units. Signs advertise rooms for rent, an indication of the tourism Mr. Jeremias helped attract to this overwhelmingly Palestinian part of town.

Here, in a room at Mr. Jeremias's lovingly restored Efendi hotel, Aby Har-Even, 84, a former director of the Israeli Space Agency, struggled for breath on May 11 as smoke billowed into his room.

The previous day, Moussa Hassouna, a 32-year-old Arab protester, was shot dead in the city of Lod by Jewish men who said they acted in self-defense and were promptly released on bail. He was the first fatality of days of mayhem. Nobody has been charged.

A Jewish man, Yigal Yehoshua, was killed when Arabs threw a heavy rock at him in Lod. An investigation is "still ongoing," the police said in an email. In Umm al Fahm, an Arab town south of Acre, Muhammad Kiwan, a 17-year-old Palestinian, was fatally shot on May 12. The police acknowledge they opened fire on a vehicle they say threatened them, but they insist they do not know if Mr. Kiwan was in it, as his family asserts.

Worried about the mounting tension, Mr. Jeremias had gone to his seafront restaurant when he got a call saying the hotel was on fire. Grabbing a fire extinguisher, he rushed to the hotel, where all 12 rooms were full, 24 guests in all.

"The hotel was dark, no electricity, and there was heavy, heavy smoke," he recalled. "We gathered all the guests downstairs. One of them was hurt with burns and choked by smoke. He was taken to hospital."

Mr. Jeremias was at his seafront restaurant when he got a call saying his hotel was on fire. “The hotel was dark, no electricity, and there was heavy, heavy smoke,” he recalled. Dan Balilty for The New York Times

That guest, Mr. Har-Even, never regained consciousness. He was pronounced dead on June 6.

From the hotel, Mr. Jeremias ran back to his restaurant, five minutes away, to find it burning from Molotov cocktails hurled by an angry Arab mob. He struggled for 90 minutes with the help of sympathetic Arab neighbors, trying to contain the blaze.

By the time the fire was out, Uri Buri, named one of the world’s top 25 restaurants by Tripadvisor, was a blackened shell, and a Jewish entrepreneur’s 25-year attempt to revive Acre had been reduced to ashes.

“Jews didn’t buy properties or start business in the Arab Old City in 1996,” Mr. Jeremias said. “All my friends said I was stupid.”

He rejects the charge of exclusionary gentrification, and the suggestion that the Old City functioned as little more than a quaint slice of Arab folklore for his wealthy clientele.

“If I give work and hope and an education and a future to Arab families in the Old City, is that bad?” he asked. “When I started, the electric system, the sewage system, everything was broken. Suddenly you had tourists interested to stay in the city. Acre was blooming, with a lot of places owned by Arabs doing Airbnb.”

His gaze was defiant. “If you don’t do anything to bring them forward,” he said, “they say this is a kind of apartheid. If you do take care, then it is gentrification. So, what is better? Which side do you prefer? What is the problem?”

Palestinians say the problem is both — segregation and gentrification. The Israeli housing authority now imposes expensive renovation standards in Old Acre, making it unaffordable for Palestinians who are consistently denied mortgages.

“The Nakba is a continuous thing, it’s not over,” said Mr. Amer, the activist. “You see it in Sheikh Jarrah” — a reference to a Jerusalem neighborhood where 300 Palestinian residents face possible eviction to make way for Jewish settlers — “and you see it here in the economic problems, job issues, neglect, lack of access to loans that drives Palestinian citizens out.”

The Israeli housing authority has imposed expensive renovation standards in Acre's Old City, making it unaffordable for many Palestinians. Dan Balilty for The New York Times

Precariousness, a sense that their homes could always be taken, is a perennial condition of the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Aside from seven Bedouin towns established in the Negev desert, no new Arab towns or villages have been built since 1948. Education remains intricately segregated: Arabs overwhelmingly attend Arab schools and Jews Jewish schools, themselves split into secular and religious categories.

Arab municipalities, occupying less than 3 percent of Israeli territory, are unable to expand because of land regulations and have found themselves hemmed in by more than 900 new Jewish villages and towns.

The lack of access to land has led to helter-skelter unlicensed Arab construction in mixed towns like Nazareth. New floors are piled on top of each other; unfinished homes point rebar at the sky.

Such building is often penalized by Israeli authorities with fines and demolition orders, another source of the anger that overflowed in May.

I asked Mr. Amer if Mr. Jeremias should rebuild.

"Yes, he should reopen," Mr. Amer said. "I don't want to face problems if I want to open a business in a Jewish area. Anyone who adds to prosperity is welcome, but not when you are narrowing the space of the local people."

In the Old City, youths in black T-shirts hung around idly, leaning against crumbling walls. Nearly half the Palestinians in Acre live in poverty. Drug use and crime are high. Both tend to be met with police indifference, many Palestinians say.

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The Israeli police denied complaints of negligence, saying in an email that they used "many and various tools" to "crack down on crime and drug offenses while carrying out various overt and covert operations to expose the perpetrators."

At the bustling market, a single shop was charred. It was targeted during the May riots because it belongs to Shimon Malka, the only Jew working there. His parents came from Morocco in 1954.

“I am surprised they burned my business down,” he said. “I love everyone here. Everyone here loves me.”

A Palestinian Woman Is Beaten in Haifa

Haifa, a mixed city like Acre, is sometimes called the “Arab Tel Aviv.” To a greater extent than elsewhere in Israel, Jews and Palestinians mingle. Relative affluence attenuates ethnic fracture. There is a vibrant Jewish-Arab arts and party scene. At Technion, Israel’s pre-eminent high-tech university, more than 20 percent of students are Palestinian.

If there is a symbol of generational Palestinian evolution in Israel, it is perhaps this handsome city that cascades down from Jewish Carmel to the mainly Arab German Colony district. The first post-1948 Arab generation wanted to keep a low profile and assimilate. The second understood they needed to educate themselves, make money.

The third, said Ms. Touma-Sliman, the Arab lawmaker, “see that they and their parents are still facing racism, and start looking back for their real identity, and building it up. They are well educated, they know how to defend their rights. We are in the third wave.”

“Here there is the lowest level of inter-community hatred, and that is the best you can hope for,” said Wadie Abunassar, a Palestinian Christian businessman who serves as Spain’s honorary consul-general in Haifa.

Yet on May 12, the day after Uri Buri was torched, Mr. Abunassar’s daughter Sama, 22, was attacked outside the family home in the German Colony district by a mob of Jewish vigilantes. She was returning from her job at an eyewear store, she said, when she saw the group of about 30 young Jews waving Israeli flags and accompanied by a police officer.

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They yelled vile insults and hurled stones at her when they heard her speak Arabic to a neighbor, she said. One threw a rock that smashed the windshield of her car. She screamed. Her sister, Nardine, 20, rushed out and was hit by a stone that cut her leg open.

“I ran to the police officer, asking for assistance,” Ms. Abunassar said, struggling to contain sobs. “He looked at me and said, ‘Get lost.’”

Her father was at a hotel in Tiberias when he got the call: “Papa, we are under attack and there’s nobody to help us.” He called the police. A half-hour later he called them again. The police did not come. The two young women spent seven hours in the hospital.

The Israeli police said in an email that an investigation, started immediately, “is still ongoing in an equitable, professional and thorough manner,” even if “suspects in the act have not yet been identified.”

Across the country, 35 Jews have been indicted for their roles in the violence, said Jafar Farah, the director of the Mossawa Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens in Israel. “And 450 Arabs.”

“We are law-abiding citizens,” Ms. Abunassar said. “We pay our taxes, but the state does not protect us when we need it. They don’t invest resources in us.”

The new government of Prime Minister Naftali Bennett says it will try. Prodded by its Arab coalition member Raam, the first independent Arab party to join an Israeli government, it has earmarked some $16.3 billion for development of Arab society. Plans include a massive economic stimulus, fighting crime and fixing crumbling infrastructure.

A fire started by rioters in the Hadar neighborhood in Haifa in May. Daniel Rolider/Getty Images

But the tension between democracy and Israel being a Jewish state that grants priority status to Jews, as the nation-state law underscored, remains problematic.

“If you are democratic, that says equal treatment,” Mr. Tibi, the lawmaker, said. “If you are Jewish, you are telling Moshe that he’s superior to Hamid.”

At the most basic level, rights diverge. Any Jew can automatically become an Israeli citizen, so there is unequal access to citizenship. Jewish land claims, however murky their origin in Ottoman times or earlier, are generally upheld; Palestinian claims are rebuffed. Palestinians who fled in 1948 were quickly deemed "absentees" by law with no claim to the land they left. "After 1948 Israelis said, it does not matter what led you to leave, it's ours now," said Camil Odeh, a Palestinian lawyer.

The violent standoff over Sheikh Jarrah, where Jewish settler claims are based on a 19th century land deed, reflects this discrepancy.

"What we need now," argued Yuval Shany, a former dean of the Hebrew University law school, "is to enact a specific right to individual equality as a new basic law." It had been a mistake in recent years, he said, "to over-define the Jewish nature of the state."

Whether a parliamentary majority for such a law can be forged is unclear. Mr. Abunassar said: "You know, if there is dignity everything comes."

The Ice Cream Initiative in Ma'alot Tarshiha

Ma'alot Tarshiha, with a population of about 25,000, is one of the rare mixed municipalities that were spared the May violence. Situated in the northern Galilee region of mountains and orchards, it is divided between fast-expanding, mainly Jewish Ma'alot, where many residents came from the former Soviet Union, and the much smaller old Arab village of Tarshiha.

In Ma'alot, roads are spacious and public spaces manicured. Below it, across Route 89 in Tarshiha, it's a different story, one of grime and long frustration at delays in building a new elementary school. All around it, new Jewish towns sprout, making natural growth impossible.

Arkady Pomerantz, the Jewish mayor of Ma'alot Tarshiha, who came to Israel from Azerbaijan in 1990, said that when the violence erupted, he brought local religious leaders together to appeal for calm.

"Here it is more middle-class than in Lod or Acre, which helps," he said. "Many of the teachers, doctors and lawyers are Arab. I go to an Arab doctor. There is good hummus in Tarshiha, and people from Ma'alot go to the Arab market there."

“Here it is more middle-class than in Lod or Acre, which helps. Many of the teachers, doctors and lawyers are Arab,” said Arkady Pomerantz, the Jewish mayor of Ma’alot Tarshiha. Dan Balilty for The New York Times

Over in Tarshiha, in an ancient carpentry shop belonging to the Palestinian deputy mayor, Nakhli Tannous, frustration ran high. Maurice Ebileeni, a lecturer in English literature at Haifa University, lambasted what he called “hummus coexistence.”

“One half, the privileged half in Ma’alot, talks about coexistence, which means drinking our coffee and eating our hummus and going home to plan their children’s future,” he said. “We go home and worry about our children’s future.”

One Israeli Jew and one Palestinian from Ma’alot Tarshiha decided to join forces in an attempt to improve that future.

Adam Ziv, who grew up on a Galilee kibbutz, learned how to make gelato on a hitchhiking trip across Italy. An idea came to him: He would build a bridge between Jews and Arabs by starting an ice cream business.

Upon returning to Israel in 2011, Mr. Ziv wandered through Arab villages asking if anyone wanted to work with him on an ice cream business. He got used to people looking at him like he was insane.

Then, near Ma’alot Tarshiha, he met Alaa Sweetat, a Palestinian restaurateur.

“It took me two days to say yes,” Mr. Sweetat said. “He wanted a village atmosphere, no malls, Italian quality.”

A year later, in 2012, the first branch of Buza (Arabic for ice cream) opened in Ma’alot Tarshiha. There are now five Buza stores, including one in Tel Aviv.

A photograph of Mr. Ziv, 36, and Mr. Sweetat, 38, with the caption “Coexistence served up in a cone,” now adorns Ben-Gurion International Airport.

Seated outside the first outlet, at a busy crossroads on the Arab side of town, Mr. Sweetat evinced little of the idealism of his Jewish partner.

“This is only a business for me,” he said. “I am not here to make peace. I wanted to work, and by chance we happen to be an Arab and a Jew. And if we can do something to bring change along the way, then great.”

Alaa Sweetat, right, and Adam Ziv, owners of the Buza ice cream chain. “I wanted to work, and by chance we happen to be an Arab and a Jew,” Mr. Sweetat said. “And if we can do something to bring change along the way, then great.” Dan Balilty for The New York Times

The May violence, he continued, had been hard for him as a Palestinian. Seeing the destruction of Uri Buri on TV, he put himself in the shoes of Mr. Jeremias. Mr. Sweetat, too, has a restaurant, and some local Palestinians resent it for serving expensive food to a mainly Jewish clientele.

“OK, Uri’s rich, but I have no problem with that,” he said. “He brought more tourism to Acre, businesses around him had more work.”

Mr. Sweetat is prepared to make compromises in a land where few are ready to do so. He believes cooperation in pursuit of shared prosperity, however difficult, is the only way forward. “If we don’t like it,” he said, “we can pack our bags and go to Switzerland.”

I asked him if he felt like an equal citizen in Israel.

“Of course, I don’t feel equal,” he said, “but I can achieve everything I want.”

Still, he said, “I don’t see new Arab villages being built. I don’t have enough space in my own village. I wanted to buy a piece of land near Tarshiha, but I couldn’t. I want my son, who is 2, to grow up here. Ask the country why I can’t find land here.”

“So, you *can’t* achieve everything you want?” I asked.

“There are things you can’t change, but we can improve them. The change can start from people.”

Overcoming Mutual Incomprehension

When Tal Becker, the legal adviser to the Israeli Foreign Ministry, drafted the preamble to the normalization treaty between Israel and the United Arab Emirates last year, he expected pushback on this clause:

“Recognizing that the Arab and Jewish peoples are descendants of a common ancestor, Abraham, and inspired, in that spirit, to foster in the Middle East a reality in which Muslims, Jews, Christians and peoples of all faiths, denominations, beliefs and nationalities live in, and are committed to, a spirit of coexistence.”

There was no dissent, despite the fact that the wording made clear that both Jews and Arabs belong in the Middle East.

A widespread view among Palestinians and throughout the Arab world has long been, on the contrary, that Israel and its Jewish population represent an illicit colonial projection into the Middle East that will one day end.

The Arab part of Ma'alot Tarshiha. Dan Balilty for The New York Times

The four agreements Israel signed last year with Arab countries, known as the Abraham Accords, formalized a fundamental shift. More Arabs across the Middle East accept Israel, and for some the Palestinian cause burns with less intensity.

What, Mr. Becker has wondered, would an internal Abraham Accord look like? The devastating riots have made the need for a new inter-community compact clear.

Not all the signs are negative. The new government is beholden in a new way to the Arab community because Arabs are represented in the coalition. There has been some discussion since 2018 of repealing or amending the nation-state law. Israel's Arab minority could help it integrate in the region. Improving education and housing for Arabs has become a subject of vigorous debate.

Tammy Hoffman, an expert on education in Israel, said: "Arabs learn Hebrew from third grade. Jews need to learn Arabic from third grade, too. If we don't know the language, how do we get past the stereotypes?"

She continued: "You have to give Arab students a place in school to talk about the Nakba, because if you don't do that in schools, there is a vacuum, and someone will go in there and be more extreme."

No internal Abraham accord will have much chance, however, as long as the West Bank occupation continues and without addressing the sources of Palestinians' sense of injustice, beginning with property laws.

At root, the violence of May was born of mutual incomprehension. For Jews it carried deep memories of pogroms, for Palestinians equally traumatic memories of mass expulsion. Past trauma is the conflict's kindling.

Many Israeli Jews say Palestinians do just fine by the abject standards of minorities in the Middle East. They can vote. They are in the Knesset, on the Supreme Court. That may be so, but equality for all citizens was a founding principle of Israel's democracy.

A woman on her balcony in Ma'alot Tarshiha. Dan Balilty for The New York Times

People on both sides are awakening to the need to address Israel's failed coexistence. Because in the end there is no realistic alternative to living together.

"I am not busy with hatred, revenge, pettiness or anything," Mr. Jeremias said. "I have a target to bring the restaurant back to normal as soon as possible, and bring sanity, and whatever will lead to a better future for my children and grandchildren."

To be stable, that Israeli future will have to include Palestinian children and grandchildren.

Sama Abunassar, the young Palestinian woman attacked by a Jewish mob in Haifa, said: "I always heard talk about discrimination and racism in this country, and I always heard the reference to us as second-class citizens, but I never felt it, perhaps because I live in Haifa. But now I know that I will never be treated like a Jewish girl in this country. If a Jewish girl went through what I went through, she would be protected. I know now for a fact that I will never be protected."

For a democratic Israel to come close to the ideals of its 1948 founding charter — that the nascent state would "ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex" — Ms. Abunassar must one day be convinced otherwise.

Reem Makhoul contributed reporting from Jerusalem.